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The Era of Boundlessness at St. Mary's of the Barrens, 1818-1843: A Brief Historical Analysis

BY

RICHARD J. JANET, PH.D.

*"The growth of the Congregation in America
in the midst of all these vicissitudes was truly amazing."*

— Joseph Rosati (1839)

Introduction

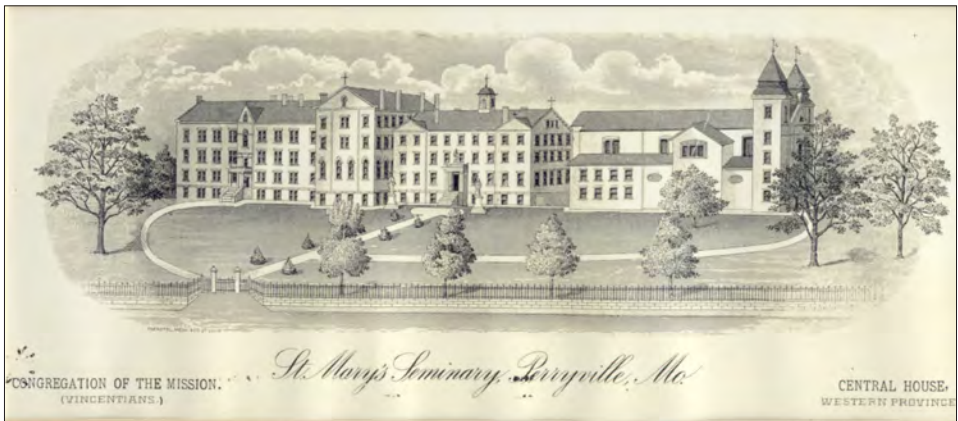
In two important articles published in the last decade, the renowned Catholic historian Philip Gleason offers a rich paradigm for the contextualization of the history of Catholicism in the early American republic.¹ Gleason argues that the early history of Catholic institutions in the United States (c. 1790-1850) was characterized by a movement from an amorphous, *ad hoc*, dynamic growth to a more regularized and differentiated development. Gleason adopts the language of Herbert Spencer, who described the process of biological evolution as a movement from "indefinite, incoherent homogeneity" to "definite, coherent heterogeneity" among biological species, to describe the growth of American Catholicism. Early American Catholic institutions, including schools and colleges, moved from a state of homogeneity, in which they were largely undifferentiated from each other and largely interdependent, to one of heterogeneity by the middle of the nineteenth century, when institutions became more clearly defined and differentiated in their functions and governance. In the process, Gleason, borrowing from the ideas of American cultural historian John Higham, suggests that the spirit guiding Catholic historical development — and, perhaps, the leadership styles demanded by that spirit — changed from one of "boundlessness," in which all things were possible (or necessary, given the strict limitations on available resources), including occasionally audacious decisions made by pioneering bishops, to one of "consolidation," in which more cautious leaders sought to manage Catholic growth in a more standardized manner in order to stabilize their institutions.

Gleason's theory provides a valuable tool for the historical analysis

¹ Philip Gleason, "Boundlessness, Consolidation and Discontinuity Between Generations: Catholic Seminary Studies in Antebellum America," *Church History* 73:3 (September 2004), 583-612; and "From an Indefinite Homogeneity: Catholic Colleges in Antebellum America," *Catholic Historical Review* 94:1 (January 2008), 45-74.

of individual early American Catholic institutions, whose histories might be measured against this model of movement from “homogeneity and boundlessness” to “heterogeneity and consolidation.” Many general histories of American Catholicism lend themselves, if unwittingly, to a “rise and fall” model that stresses broad forces over individual entities and initiatives. Gleason’s framework affords a more subtle approach, implying that even in its earliest moments of challenge and poverty the American Catholic Church enjoyed opportunities for growth and adaptation through a visionary cadre of leaders; and in its moment of greatest physical growth the Church adopted tactics of consolidation offered by more prosaic leaders. Gleason’s model recognizes that American Catholicism was as much influenced by internal factors as external pressures, that the personalities and decisions of its leaders, and the unique circumstances of its institutions, directed Catholic development as well as the challenges, prejudices, and limitations of the surrounding culture. It is an approach that allows for a greater focus on individual Catholic communities and figures, and encourages a deeper appreciation of the course of institutional histories in early Catholic America.

Gleason supports his main arguments regarding the “boundlessness” of early American Catholic seminary development, and the transition from “indefinite homogeneity” to the more differentiated status of Catholic colleges, through a brief historical review of several factors influencing institutional histories. Those factors include: (1) an early generation of visionary leaders who confronted challenges in an often creative and improvisational manner; (2) a tendency to consider the needs of the Church in a holistic fashion and to respond to those needs by adapting institutions



Early etching of St. Mary's of the Barrens Seminary, Perryville, Missouri.
 Images collected by the Vincentian Studies Institute

according to circumstances, so that colleges and seminaries often became multi-faceted Catholic centers serving the various needs of the local Catholic community; (3) an accompanying flexibility of organization and policy resulting in “mixed” institutions combining lay and clerical students, as well as various instructional levels, hybrid curricula, and intermixing of Catholic and Protestant students; (4) an ambivalent relationship to American culture, resulting in later criticisms and calls by some commentators for a more Americanized Catholic Church; and (5) the persistence of a variety of frustrating problems growing out of the *ad hoc* nature of Catholic growth.

The early history of St. Mary’s of the Barrens Seminary and College in Perryville, Missouri, certainly reflects important elements of Gleason’s conceptual framework. Founded in 1818 as an outgrowth of missionary efforts for Bishop William Dubourg, S.S., and his vast Louisiana diocese, “the Barrens”² grew from unpromising roots in a relatively isolated region 75 miles south of St. Louis to become what Gleason describes as a “staging area for the Church’s expansion” and “all-purpose center of Catholic life” for the diocese.³ In the process, St. Mary’s reflected the “mixed” nature of early Catholic colleges, as it combined seminarians with lay college students, Catholics with Protestants, practical with classical curricula, as well as various levels of instruction.

The early leaders of the Barrens also reflected the pioneering spirit observed by Gleason, a spirit that necessitated situational decisions combining Catholic institutions in a manner frowned upon by European superiors, emphasizing practical considerations and needs over ecclesiastical niceties.⁴ Of course, the dynamic spirit conditioned by the harsh circumstances facing early American Catholic institutions often spawned tension and controversy — over the irregular nature of seminary studies, the “mixed” composition of seminary-colleges, the relationship between bishops and religious communities, and the differences in perspectives between the first and second generations of Catholic leaders.⁵

² While sources differ on the origins of the term “Barrens,” the historical geographer Walter Schroeder notes that the term was “not transferred from Kentucky,” the previous homeland of many of the settlers of the region. Instead, it referred generically to grasslands or prairie, like the area of the southern Ste. Genevieve district (west of the marshy bottom land near the Mississippi River) where Isidore Moore led his extended family in 1803-04. Schroeder notes that as early as 1805 the term was used to refer to this community of settlers, as opposed to the “open landscape.” Walter Schroeder, *Opening the Ozarks: A Historical Geography of Missouri’s Ste. Genevieve District, 1760-1830* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 389.

³ Gleason, “From an Indefinite Homogeneity,” 61-2.

⁴ Gleason, “Boundlessness, Consolidation and Discontinuity,” 583-612.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 599-612.

St. Mary's of the Barrens experienced both the exuberance and the challenges inherent in the transition from "boundlessness to consolidation" in the American Church. William Dubourg, Felix De Andreis, C.M., Joseph Rosati, C.M., and John Timon, C.M., courageously laid the groundwork for the Barrens, overseeing its early establishment and growth from desperation to successful mission center. In the process, they also suffered the criticisms incited by their decisions — decisions that, as Gleason generalizes of most early American seminary leaders, reflected a "ragged informality" designed to address the "pastoral needs of the pioneer era."⁶ At one point in its early history, those decisions threatened to close the Barrens, and a later generation of American Vincentian superiors indeed opted to remove seminary operations from St. Mary's in the name of stabilization and "consolidation." But, in the interim, especially over the quarter-century from 1818-1843, St. Mary's of the Barrens experienced an "era of boundlessness" in which talented and visionary leaders established a beachhead of Catholicism in southeast Missouri despite severe practical and cultural limitations. An analysis of the history of the Barrens during this period reflects some of Philip Gleason's central points about the problems and possibilities facing Catholic institutions in the early nineteenth-century United States.

The Leadership of the Early Barrens

The quarter-century following the establishment of St. Mary's of the Barrens Seminary in 1818 were eventful ones for the Vincentian mission and the American Catholic Church. At the Barrens, the early Vincentian pioneers struggled to develop a stable institution that met the often rigorous expectations of the Congregation for discipline and uniformity, while also addressing the real needs of Bishop Dubourg's far-flung diocese. The lack of priests to serve a territory vast in distance but sparse in Catholic population complicated the situation at the Barrens, as did the difficulties in physically building a motherhouse and seminary, problems of finances and debt, the problem of maintaining Vincentian identity in a "mixed" environment, the transfer of priests to serve area parishes and missions, evidence of anti-Catholic bigotry in the surrounding territory, and the sometimes strained relations with diocesan authorities.

Fortunately, the Barrens community was well served by a number of talented and energetic leaders who stamped the early American mission with their distinctive virtues and qualities. Men like William Dubourg, Felix de Andreis, Joseph Rosati and John Timon achieved heroic status in the history of the Vincentians in America through their efforts on behalf of the Barrens

⁶ *Ibid.*, 600-01.

and the Church in upper Louisiana. Indeed, their work drew the attention of the broader Church — Rosati and Timon became pioneer bishops in St. Louis and Buffalo, and the cause for the canonization of De Andreis was promoted within a century of his death. The clerical founders of the Barrens were among the “first rate men” admired by mid-century observers for their talents and commitment to the American mission.⁷

Before the French Revolution, Louis William Valentine Dubourg,⁸ born in 1766 to an affluent planter family on the French colony of Santo Domingo, seemed destined for a distinguished career in the French Church. However, growing restrictions resulting from the French Revolution forced Dubourg to flee Paris for Spain and, ultimately, the young American republic. In the United States, Dubourg gained a reputation as an educational entrepreneur given his work at Georgetown Academy and St. Mary’s College (Maryland). His work brought him to the attention of the American Primate John Carroll, who appointed Dubourg apostolic administrator for the vast Louisiana Territory in 1812. Difficulties in this new ecclesiastical territory brought Dubourg to Rome by 1815, where he was eventually consecrated first bishop of the new Louisiana diocese in September.⁹

During his Roman sojourn Dubourg worked to recruit missionaries for his understaffed pioneer diocese, and the Vincentians at Monte Citorio¹⁰ became prime targets for the bishop’s efforts.¹¹ Dubourg’s dramatic enticement of Vincentians, including the talented Felix De Andreis, set in motion the train of events that led to the founding of the Barrens just three years later. In addition to his initial recruitment of Italian Vincentians for the Louisiana diocese, Dubourg’s principal contributions to the history of the Barrens included the bold decision to move his episcopal see to St. Louis, and to involve Vincentian missionaries in disparate activities throughout upper and lower Louisiana. Dubourg was also intimately involved in the details

⁷ Gleason, “Boundlessness, Consolidation and Discontinuity,” 590-91, quoting Jeremiah W. Cummings, “Vocations to the Priesthood,” *Brownson’s Quarterly Review* 17 (October 1860), 505.

⁸ On Dubourg, see Anna M. Melville, *Louis William Dubourg: Bishop of Louisiana and the Floridas, Bishop of Montauban, and Archbishop of Besançon, 1766-1833*, 2 Vols. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1986).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:303-327; and Charles O’Neill, “A Quarter Marked by Sundry Peculiarities: New Orleans, Lay Trustees and Père Antoine,” *Catholic Historical Review* 76:2 (April 1990), 235-78.

¹⁰ The Congregation of the Mission fled France after the sack of Saint-Lazare in July 1789, and for the next forty years the governance of the community was divided, with a thriving Roman province anchored at Monte Citorio as home to an Italian vicar-general. Monte Citorio also enjoyed close ties to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, and its prefect, Lorenzo Cardinal Litta, directed Dubourg to that house during the bishop’s Roman visit.

¹¹ The story of Dubourg’s recruitment of Italian Vincentians for his mission diocese is well told in several sources, including Stafford Poole, C.M., “The Founding of Missouri’s First College: Saint Mary’s of the Barrens, 1815-1818,” *Missouri Historical Review* 65:1 (October 1970), 1-22.

surrounding the establishment of the Barrens, from the selection of the site to the layout of the buildings and organization of the curriculum.¹² Indeed, his willingness to intervene in affairs directly touching on the Barrens, for better or for worse, became a recurring theme in the early history of the institution.

Dubourg's biographer quotes a contemporary eulogy of him as "perhaps the most perceptive and enduring estimation" of his career — "In the name of heaven he set out 'as a giant to run the way'if we follow the man, the priest, the bishop, through so many responsible and trying relations, we will not stop to examine the imperfections of frail humanity; they all vanish before this galaxy of brilliant and virtuous deeds, like spots in the firmament swallowed up in the gorgeous light of the mid-day sun."¹³



Felix De Andreis, C.M. (1778-1820). Etching.
Images collected by the Vincentian Studies Institute

By all accounts, Felix De Andreis, first superior of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States and leader of the missionary band that

¹² "Nothing escaped him," Joseph Rosati wrote later, "He went into the smallest detail about anything that could be useful to his beloved seminary," including the shipment of 200 apple trees to the Barrens with instructions on how and where to plant them. Joseph Rosati, C.M., "Recollections of the Establishment of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States, Part 5," *Vincentian Heritage* 5:1 (1984), 117.

¹³ Melville, *Dubourg*, 2:961-62.

founded the Barrens seminary in 1818, was an extraordinary man.¹⁴ From his birth in Piedmont in 1778 to his death in St. Louis, friends and co-workers commented on his intellectual gifts and personal charisma, as well as his remarkable piety and humility. His extant letters reveal a sensitive spirit, alive to the numerous practical demands of active ministry, eager for new knowledge, modest to a fault, and full of spiritual zeal in the mold of Saint Vincent de Paul. According to one account, he was nearly denied admission to the Vincentian order because of his poetic sensibility, which seemed incompatible with the “simple and familiar” routine of normal Vincentian work among the poor, uneducated Catholics of nineteenth-century Italy.¹⁵ A more recent assessment of his personality, based on close examination of his letters, acknowledges an “inquiring and restless mind” given to fits of melancholy and depression.¹⁶

De Andreis became the superior of the small band of missionaries who landed in Baltimore in 1816, and eventually found their way into Missouri by 1818. In late 1817, De Andreis accompanied Bishop Dubourg to St. Louis, where the Vincentian lived and worked until his death in October 1820.¹⁷ In St. Louis, De Andreis served as vicar-general for Dubourg’s vast Louisiana diocese as well as superior of the Vincentian mission. Living in difficult conditions in a crowded rectory, with constant health concerns, overwhelming pastoral duties (including the responsibility to teach in both French and English), and a lack of both the books and the Vincentian colleagues that nurtured him, De Andreis managed to build a strong base for both Dubourg’s diocesan establishment in St. Louis, and a permanent Vincentian house, ultimately at the Barrens.

De Andreis’ main interest was always for the development of the Vincentian American mission. While he never visited the Barrens, he remained its titular superior and advocate until his death. His reports to Rome doted on the needs and progress of the fledgling seminary. He constantly

¹⁴ On De Andreis, see Joseph Rosati, C.M., *Life of the Very Reverend Felix De Andreis, C.M.: First Superior of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States and Vicar General of Upper Louisiana* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1900); Alceste Bozuffi, *The Servant of God: Felix De Andreis, Priest of the Mission* (English translation, Perryville, MO: 1930), copy in De Andreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, John T. Richardson Library, DePaul University, Chicago, IL (DRMA); and John E. Rybolt, C.M., ed., *Frontier Missionary: Felix De Andreis, 1778-1820: Correspondence and Historical Writings* (Chicago: Vincentian Studies Institute, 2005).

¹⁵ Bozuffi, *Servant of God*, 17.

¹⁶ John E. Rybolt, C.M., “Three Pioneer Vincentians,” *Vincentian Heritage* 14:1 (1993), 157 and 155 respectively.

¹⁷ Dubourg’s decision to move his diocesan see from New Orleans to St. Louis occasioned multiple hardships for De Andreis, as conditions in the upper Louisiana town proved primitive and ill-prepared to accommodate an episcopal dignity. See Melville, *Dubourg*, 2:508-09.

worried about the scattering of Vincentians across Upper Louisiana, which militated against the Congregation's rules for community life and prayer. He stoutly defended Vincentian interests in the Louisiana diocese, and acted as an important go-between with (and potentially calming influence on) the sometimes impulsive Bishop Dubourg.

Although in part a very idealistic man, who could dig in his heels in maintenance of Church laws and discipline, De Andreis was faced with practical demands that stretched his understanding and patience. He tried to make a virtue of necessity, telling his former superior Bartolomeo Colucci, C.M., "I am overwhelmed when I think of the grace of having been called to these missions, and I really cannot explain what I feel about it. I say only that if I do not become holy I would be even worse than a demon since the opportunities to practice the most beautiful Christian virtues even heroically are so beautiful, so frequent, so urgent, so attractive, so incomparable. In our houses in Europe I would never have had opportunities like these."¹⁸ But he missed the familiar environment, intellectual stimulation, and camaraderie of his former life. In many ways, De Andreis was unsuited for missionary work. He was too fragile, too sensitive, too torn between his commitments to high ideals and his compassion for the immediate needs of the people. That tension was expressed in his ambivalence regarding slavery (which he abhorred but was forced to accept as a practical expediency), and the Indians he wished to serve, whom he praised for their simplicity, innocence, and spiritual capacity, but criticized for their primitive habits.¹⁹ Indeed, De Andreis's efforts to balance ideals with practical realities would be reflected throughout the history of the Barrens and the early Vincentian missions in America. It is, perhaps, the primary tension evident in Vincent de Paul's own efforts to accommodate practical necessity while retaining high ideals and spiritual rigor.

De Andreis finally succumbed to his physical ailments and died in St. Louis on 15 October 1820. His death was felt most keenly at the Barrens. "The loss of this holy man could have ruined the establishment of the Congregation in America, of which he was the founder, the Superior, the support, the soul and the life," wrote Rosati, "His great virtues and talents had won the esteem and veneration of his confreres, who looked on him as their father. After his death they regarded themselves as orphans."²⁰

¹⁸ De Andreis to Bartolomeo Colucci, C.M., Rome, 27 April 1818, in Rybolt, ed., *Frontier Missionary*, 209.

¹⁹ De Andreis to Carlo Domenico Sicardi, C.M., Rome, 24 February 1818, *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁰ Joseph Rosati, C.M., "Recollections of the Establishment of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States, Part 4," *Vincentian Heritage* 4:2 (1983), 138.

Dubourg wrote a moving tribute to his vicar-general in a circular letter to the clergy of Louisiana, calling De Andreis “the hope and support of the Louisiana mission.” Vincentian historian John E. Rybolt, C.M., concurs: “[De Andreis] suffered enormously to help us flourish. His saintly life gave strength to many of his students, preparing them effectively for the life he would never share. There would not be a Vincentian community in this country without him.”²¹

Joseph Rosati, born to a noble family in the Kingdom of Naples on 12 January 1789, took vows in the Congregation of the Mission in 1808, was ordained in 1811, and joined De Andreis at Monte Citorio thereafter.²² Rosati accompanied his mentor as virtual second-in-command of the American Vincentian mission and, with De Andreis ensconced in St. Louis as Dubourg’s vicar, Rosati led the Barrens through its first struggling months. On De Andreis’s death, Rosati was appointed superior of the American Vincentian missionaries with extraordinary authority to make decisions on the ground, for “God wants you [Rosati] at the head of that work which He makes it clear is dear to Him.”²³

For the next ten years Joseph Rosati led the Barrens community. Leadership meant teaching and directing Vincentian and diocesan seminarians, serving as pastor of the Barrens church, overseeing missionaries sent from the Barrens to nearby settlements, and supervising ongoing construction activities at the site. At the same time, Rosati was appointed vicar-general of the Louisiana diocese to replace De Andreis, adding substantial travel up and down the Mississippi River to check on the fledgling Catholic outposts of the territory. In 1822, the same year he founded the lay college at the Barrens, adding to his responsibilities there, Rosati was appointed vicar-apostolic of the newly-established Vicariate of Mississippi and Alabama, although he managed to avert that assignment. Two years later, however, Rosati was elevated to coadjutorship of the diocese of Louisiana, becoming Dubourg’s lieutenant with right of succession to the bishopric.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 136; Rybolt, “Three Pioneer Vincentians,” 158.

²² On Rosati, see Frederick J. Easterly, C.M., *The Life of Right Reverend Joseph Rosati, C.M., First Bishop of St. Louis, 1789-1843* (New York: AMS Press, 1974).

²³ Rosati, “Recollections,” 4:2, 139.



Jean-Marie Odin, C.M. (1800-1870). Portrait.
Images collected by the Vincentian Studies Institute

Despite his additional diocesan duties, Rosati continued to play an active role in affairs at the Barrens, defending the establishment of the lay college, commissioning Jean-Marie Odin, C.M., and John Timon for mission work in the surrounding territories, and planning for the construction of the new Barrens church. Rosati occasionally found himself at odds with Bishop Dubourg over matters pertaining to the Barrens and the administration of the upper Louisiana section of the diocese. Their disagreements over the relocation of the seminary to lower Louisiana, and the timing of the proposed division of the diocese, contributed to Dubourg's resignation as bishop of Louisiana during his visit to Europe in 1826. Roman authorities promptly responded by dividing Dubourg's former territory into two dioceses (New Orleans and St. Louis), eventually naming Rosati the first bishop of the diocese of St. Louis (including the states of Missouri, Arkansas, western Illinois and points west to the Rocky Mountains) in March 1827. He remained administrator of the New Orleans diocese until the episcopal appointment of his Vincentian confrere Leo De Neckere, C.M., in 1829.

As the Barrens grew in these years, the work load increased for the new bishop, but a permanent replacement for Rosati at the Barrens was not appointed until 1830, allowing the bishop's final move to his see city in St. Louis. Among Rosati's last direct contributions to the Barrens was his transfer of land-deeds registered in the name of the bishop to the Vincentian community, involving a complicated series of transactions given Missouri statutes forbidding the endowment of a religious establishment.²⁴

²⁴ John E. Rybolt, C.M., *The American Vincentians: A Popular History of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States, 1818-1987* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: New City Press, 1988), 35-6. For some indication of the complexity of land transactions in the region of the Barrens, see *The Spanish Land Grants of Our Own Perry County, Missouri* (Perry County Historical Society, 1984).

As bishop of St. Louis, Rosati compiled an enviable record of expansion and accomplishment. The first permanent cathedral, still standing on the banks of the Mississippi River, was completed in 1834. Jesuit priests were recruited to evangelize among the Indian tribes, and to staff the male academy that grew into St. Louis University. Orders of religious sisters and lay brothers were drawn to St. Louis to open schools, hospitals, and orphanages. Under Rosati, St. Louis became a beacon of mid-American Catholicism.²⁵ Of course, Rosati's early recognition of the lack of resources for the Missouri Church also proved correct, and he passed on an unenviable load of debt to his successors.

Bishop Rosati was also an active participant in the national affairs of the American Church. He helped recruit and consecrate new bishops, played leading roles at the first four Councils of Baltimore, and accepted diplomatic missions on behalf of the Holy See.²⁶ In the course of his European travels, Rosati also provided invaluable service to his own religious community as mediator between the quarreling French and Italian branches of the Vincentians.²⁷ His health weakened in the process of these varied and tedious negotiations, and Rosati died in Rome on 25 September 1843.

Joseph Rosati looms large in the history of the American Vincentians and the American Catholic Church in general. Beginning with his leadership at the Barrens, Rosati displayed talents that marked him for advancement and prominence in the American Church. In a recent assessment of Rosati's legacy, John Rybolt credits Rosati with effectively founding the Congregation of the Mission in the United States through his wise, practical leadership, careful sense of history, lively persona, and national prominence. Rosati emerges in this portrait as a "multi-faceted personality who put order and purpose into the Mission."²⁸ The renowned St. Louis Jesuit religious historian William Barnaby Faherty described Rosati as "an outstanding pastoral bishop" who exhibited all the qualities necessary for leadership in the missionary American Church — "organizational ability, zeal, order, discipline, dedication and bounce."²⁹ Rosati stamped these characteristics onto the early history of St. Mary's of the Barrens at a crucial period in the history of the new institution.

²⁵ See Peter J. Rahill, "St. Louis Under Bishop Rosati," *Missouri Historical Review* 66:4 (July 1972), 495-519; see also, John E. Rybolt, C.M., "Joseph Rosati, C.M. (1789-1843), Pioneer American Bishop," *Vincentiana* 48:2 (2004), 394-403.

²⁶ Stafford Poole, C.M., "The Diplomatic Missions of Bishop Joseph Rosati C.M.," *Catholic Historical Review* 91:4 (October 2005), 633-87.

²⁷ Rybolt, "Pioneer Bishop," 7.

²⁸ Rybolt, "Three Pioneer Vincentians," 161.

²⁹ William B. Faherty, S.J., "In the Footsteps of Bishop Joseph Rosati," *Italian Americana* 1:2 (Spring, 1975), 290-91.

In 1831 the Roman Vincentians sent John Tornatore, C.M.,³⁰ to the Barrens to relieve Rosati of his duties as superior. An experienced teacher and administrator with a solid reputation for rigorous adherence to the rules of the Congregation, Tornatore's tenure proved problematic for the Barrens. Although he did see the construction of the new church through to completion, and commissioned Odin for an important European fund-raising tour, old problems festered and new ones emerged at the still-young establishment. The problem of mixing lay collegians, diocesan seminarians, and Vincentian seminarians at the Barrens was exacerbated by the new superior's predilection for following the letter of the law. Numbers decreased in the college, to the financial detriment of the entire institution. The American Vincentian mission ran up a debt, enormous for the time, of 60,000 francs (roughly equivalent to \$300,000 today).³¹ The Vincentian brothers attached to the Barrens raised complaints about the state of the house, and tensions increased with now Bishop Rosati over clerical appointments and the maintenance of diocesan clerical candidates.³² Tornatore responded to the internal problems of the Barrens community "with repressive measures" consistent with his personality and Old World sense of order.³³ As a result, a number of brothers and lay students left the community, and even several priests departed for Louisiana without permission.

Jean-Marie Odin³⁴ felt these problems keenly, and during his European sojourn in 1835 he relayed his feelings to the Vincentian authorities. At the 1835 General Assembly of the Congregation, the leaders of the Vincentian community acted on Odin's recommendations. The Assembly issued a number of decrees pertaining to the American mission, including the replacement of Tornatore by John Timon, who would become superior of the Barrens and Visitor of a newly-erected American Vincentian province.³⁵

³⁰ Born in Piedmont in 1783, Tornatore joined the Congregation of the Mission in 1803 and worked at Monte Citorio as theology professor and assistant to the Roman vicar-general Antonio Baccari.

³¹ John Timon, C.M., "Barrens Memoir," *Vincentian Heritage* 22:1 (2001), 79.

³² Rybolt, ed., *American Vincentians*, 34.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Odin (1800-1870) arrived at the Barrens in 1822, was ordained in 1824, and almost immediately set out on mission trips throughout southeast Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas. Rosati and Timon relied on Odin greatly when distracted by affairs outside the Barrens. Odin was named vicar apostolic of Texas in 1842, bishop of Galveston in 1847, and archbishop of New Orleans in 1861. See Patrick Foley, "Missionaries Extraordinaire: The Vincentians from St. Mary's of the Barrens," *Vincentian Heritage* 22:1 (2001), 1-10; and, Ralph Bayard, *The Lone Star Vanguard: The Catholic Reoccupation of Texas* (St. Louis: Vincentian Press, 1945).

³⁵ Easterly, *First Bishop*, 141.

John Timon was born of Irish immigrant parents in Conewago (present-day Hanover), Pennsylvania, on 12 February 1797, and moved with his family to St. Louis in 1819.³⁶ Influenced by Felix De Andreis, Timon joined the Vincentian community at the Barrens, where he was ordained in 1825. After his ordination he served on the faculty of the Barrens and endured the hardships of the early years at the fledgling institution. Timon's own "Barrens Memoir," written sometime after 1859, recounts his experiences as pioneer missionary traveling from the Barrens to often remote settlements and enduring the vagaries of extreme weather, dangerous travel, Protestant bigotry, scant resources, and underserved Catholic populations.³⁷

Even though he was described as a "retiring, sensitive little man, hardly five feet in height,"³⁸ Timon earned a reputation as a zealous and confident preacher and capable administrator. After Rosati's elevation to the bishopric of St. Louis and during the unfortunate administration of Tornatore, Timon apparently played a leading role in making the state of the Barrens known to the new bishop and in requesting financial assistance as well as the transfer of the Barrens property deeds.³⁹

Backed by the entire Barrens community, Timon successfully opposed the order of the General Assembly of 1835 to suppress the lay college. In the meantime, the new Visitor worked hard to restore order to the mission, improving the financial conditions of the Barrens through more regular collection of tuition revenue and acquisition of new property, and bringing errant confreres back to the central mission at the Barrens. Timon's dynamic leadership paid dividends. Student enrollment, both in the lay college and the seminary, increased. An influx of new clerics from Europe swelled the ranks of the community. Timon gained a reputation for financial acumen (his friend Ramsay Crooks of the American Fur Company provided Timon with important advice) and fund-raising ability, and his 1837 European visit yielded benefits in new recruits and 10,000 francs in contributions to the American mission.⁴⁰

Of course, success also brought renewed challenges and controversies for the Barrens and its superior. The old problem of mixing lay collegians with diocesan seminarians and Vincentian trainees continued to plague the

³⁶ On Timon, see Charles Deuther, *Life and Times of Right Reverend John Timon, D.D., First Roman Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Buffalo* (Buffalo, 1870); and Leonard R. Riforgiato and Dennis A. Castillo, *The Life and Times of John Timon (1797-1867): First Bishop of Buffalo, New York* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006).

³⁷ See Timon, "Barrens Memoir."

³⁸ *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Timon, John," 556.

³⁹ Timon, "Barrens Memoir," 66.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

institution, as did the additional debt taken on by Timon even as the financial situation generally improved. The personnel of the Vincentian mission were spread thin, even more so with the assumption of new seminary apostolates throughout the United States and the maintenance of parishes and missions surrounding the Barrens. Among the most delicate of problems faced by Timon and the community was its relationship to Bishop Rosati in matters pertaining to control of the seminary, fees for diocesan seminarians, and the assignment of Barrens personnel to posts far removed from the seminary. Timon alludes to “painful and trying scenes” with Rosati over these issues, in which a compromise was worked out in 1837 allowing Vincentians to continue service in area parishes so long as they were accorded time to attend to their community obligations at the Barrens. Timon acknowledges that he “refused several parishes which the good bishop pressed on [me]” but accepted others “under rules that left the visitor more free.”⁴¹

Invariably, the tensions created by the energetic leadership of Timon incited criticisms. Timon himself acknowledged that “several members, almost all of whom since left the Congregation, had greatly misrepresented affairs to the motherhouse.” In such circumstances, Timon determined that “a change was needed, and that, as it could not be done in the way he had wished, it was well to let it be done in the way that providence decreed.”⁴² In 1847 providence did indeed seem to intervene in the form of an offer of an episcopal appointment to the newly-erected see of Buffalo, New York. Timon accepted, and for the next twenty years he compiled an enviable record of success in establishing Catholic schools, orphanages, hospitals, and parishes, and as an ardent spokesman for the Union during the Civil War.

John Timon’s leadership represents, perhaps, the height of the “boundlessness” phase in the history of the American Vincentians and the Barrens. He directed the Barrens and his religious community through a period of substantial growth and into national prominence, but at the expense of internal tension and over-commitment. Described by contemporaries as a humble man, Timon’s writings, including his “Barrens Memoir,” reflect a confidence and tendency toward self-promotion that might be excusable given his reflections on the strides made by his community at the Barrens. As he wrote, “He [Timon] found the Congregation scattered, discontented, almost disbanded, without property but with heavy debts. He left them numerous, and, unless as to what is hinted, possessing large property quite unencumbered, and with less debt than at his commencement.”⁴³

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

In his assessment of Timon's contributions to American Vincentian history, John Rybolt emphasizes Timon's American mindset and his willingness to adapt to American conditions, the growth in numbers under his leadership which allowed Vincentians to live in community and so preserve an important element of Vincentian life, and his emphasis on education (even at the expense of more traditional Vincentian works like parish missions).⁴⁴ If De Andreis provided the spiritual roots for the Barrens, and Rosati nurtured its early growth, Timon proved nearly exuberant in bringing the Barrens to greater heights and national prominence.

The early leaders of the American Vincentian mission, and especially of the Barrens, conform to Gleason's model of creative, dynamic, and adaptive figures who met the many challenges of the early nineteenth century through policies of "boundlessness" and improvisation. Of course, it is easy to romanticize these pioneer leaders and their heroic qualities. As the collaborators on the "popular history" of the American Vincentians observed, "different periods of history called for different forms of leadership: creativity at one time, consolidation at another," and "even the great leaders of the early days made mistakes."⁴⁵ But the fact remains that the Barrens was served well at a critical time in its early history by a cadre of talented clerics who understood the challenges of the era, and who met them with a combination of resolve and adaptability.

The Identity of the Barrens

From our twenty-first century perspective, the early St. Mary's of the Barrens is difficult to identify neatly. Just what was the Barrens? Like many other early American Catholic institutions, its role was more expansive than limited. The Barrens was, in some ways, what the local bishop — in consultation with the superior of the Barrens, who in this early period was usually the bishop's vicar — said it was. This essentially dynamic identity allowed the Barrens, and other seminary-colleges in the United States, to adapt to the circumstances of a missionary Church that was long on needs and short on resources.

The original contract worked out between Bishop Dubourg and the Vincentian congregation, and signed in November 1815, reflected both the charism of the Vincentian community and the needs of Dubourg's vast ecclesiastical territory. The "essential condition" of the contract directed that the missionaries would "go out with him [Dubourg] as subjects of the Congregation of the Mission, to form an establishment in his diocese,

⁴⁴ Rybolt, "Three Pioneer Vincentians," 165.

⁴⁵ Rybolt, ed., *American Vincentians*, 437.



Louis William Dubourg (1766-1833). Portrait.
 Images collected by the Vincentian Studies Institute

discharge the different functions appertaining to their institute, and especially to found a seminary as early as possible."⁴⁶ While the contract called for the Vincentians to reside as much as possible in community, it recognized the urgent needs of Dubourg's diocese and allowed for modification of the normal formation program, and the establishment of mission parishes in accordance with the discretion of the superior of the mission.⁴⁷

Of course, the impatient Dubourg had his own plans for the newly recruited missionaries, which included the elevation of De Andreis to the status of diocesan vicar-general. In fact, De Andreis filled various roles in St. Louis. He directed several novices in the episcopal residence in a manner described as a "domestic" or "household" seminary, typical of the early American Church.⁴⁸ De Andreis also tended the cathedral church, serving the needs of Catholic families in the diocesan capital. "I am here with the bishop," he wrote, "and temporarily filling the office of vicar-general, pastor, missionary and a little bit of everything. To put it better, I am ruining all these occupations, since I am convinced that I am good for nothing."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Reprinted in *Ibid.*, 451-454.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 452-53.

⁴⁸ Gleason, "Boundlessness, Consolidation and Discontinuity," 597.

⁴⁹ De Andreis to Francesco Antonio Baccari, C.M., Rome, 3 September 1818, in Rybolt, ed., *Frontier Missionary*, 229.

Early in 1818, De Andreis wrote to the Italian Vincentian vicar-general Carlo Domenico Sicardi, C.M., regarding the Barrens, "...it will be very difficult for me to place the house that we are going to erect in a few months on the same footing as those in Italy. In this country we must be like a regiment of cavalry, or mobile infantry, needing to run here or there whenever the salvation of souls may require our presence... I believe that the Congregation is for the Church, and not the Church for the Congregation."⁵⁰ De Andreis's willingness to assume a variety of posts, drawn from his experience of the Vincentian charism and his understanding of American Catholic conditions, set the tone for the American Vincentian mission, the fortunes of the Barrens, and the activities of his immediate successors as Vincentian superiors. Rosati and Timon assumed similar roles, combining their work at the Barrens with their responsibilities as vicars-general of the diocese of St. Louis. As a result, the Barrens, always envisioned by Dubourg as a foothold of Catholicism in religiously primitive territory, was confirmed as more than "just" the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission. To meet the needs of a desperately impoverished local Church, the Barrens essentially sacrificed a coherent identity in favor of the "indefinite homogeneity" typical of early American Catholic institutions.

From its first foundations in Missouri, the seminary pursued the Vincentian tradition of rigor and commitment to uniformity, adapted to the often harsh circumstances of a largely indifferent American culture that offered few amenities or privileges. To complicate matters further, the Barrens was both a diocesan seminary, created to train priests for the bishop of Louisiana/St. Louis, and a seminary of the Vincentian community, designed to form candidates for the Congregation of the Mission. Over the course of its first 20 years of operation, the combined Barrens seminary trained, according to one report, 120 seminarians, 45 of whom were ordained to the priesthood in that period.⁵¹

One of the most immediate effects on the seminary of its interdependent relationship with the local Church was economic. The original agreement with the Barrens settlers included a grant of 640 acres, contribution of labor for the construction of the seminary, and a subscription of \$7500 for the maintenance of the Vincentian clerics at the seminary and attached parish church. But Rosati recognized quite early that the economic circumstance of the Barrens settlers, who were hardy, self-sufficient farmers but always strapped for cash, precluded any real financial commitment to the

⁵⁰ De Andreis to Carlo Domenico Sicardi, C.M., Rome, 24 February 1818, in *Ibid.*, 192.

⁵¹ "Notice," *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* (1838), 92.

seminary community.⁵² Meanwhile, Dubourg had few resources to spare and, indeed, complicated the economic problems of the Barrens by his reluctance to contribute to the support of the diocesan seminarians at the school. As a result, the seminary was forced to adopt a variety of expedients to maintain it, including the use of student labor to complete the original buildings, the purchase by the bishop of a mill on the Saline creek, and the enlargement of an early garden into a working farm. Even these measures failed to provide for the self-sufficiency of the Barrens, and the Vincentians resorted to the use of credit to maintain their establishment. Economic necessity, then, turned a seminary into a would-be self-sufficient agricultural community and debtor institution.

The nature and problem of slaveholding at the Barrens has been admirably addressed by Stafford Poole, C.M., and Douglas Slawson, who concur that “economic necessity compelled them [the Vincentians] to become slaveholders themselves” despite moral objections to the practice.⁵³ As in other issues, the attitude of Felix De Andreis reflects the tensions produced by slaveholding — De Andreis recognized the immorality of the practice and the plight of black slaves “condemned to eat the bread of sorrow and... bear the *pondus diei et aestus* [the burden of the day and the heat]” but he also realized that the “greatest need that we have is to get arms to clear and to set to work at once on the cleared land.”⁵⁴ For the inhabitants of the Barrens community, described as typical “backwoods Americans” of Southern cultural temperament, slaves provided the answer to the problem of agricultural labor, and the Vincentians, however reluctantly, followed that example.⁵⁵

The first slaves at the Barrens seminary were sent by Bishop Dubourg, himself accustomed to the practice as “an aristocratic Frenchman born in Santo Domingo” with previous experience at St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore.⁵⁶ The census of 1830 counted 27 black slaves at the Barrens seminary, making it among the largest slaveholders in the county. The presence of both male and female slaves, working as field hands and domestic servants, occasioned

⁵² While Rosati praised the fertility of the site and the qualities of the Barrens settlers, despite their relative poverty, Timon complained about the “tract of unfertile land, 640 acres, that cost \$800, promises of help for building, little of which were fulfilled; and this, under a perpetual obligation, which a capital of \$100,000 would scarcely pay.” Timon, “Barrens Memoir,” 51.

⁵³ Stafford Poole, C.M., and Douglas Slawson, *Church and Slave in Perry County, Missouri, 1818-1865* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 145.

⁵⁴ De Andreis to the Meeting at Monte Citorio, Rome, St. Louis, 21 June 1819, Rybolt, ed., *Frontier Missionary*, 286; and De Andreis to Francesco Antonio Baccari, C.M., St. Louis, 26 April 1819, *Ibid.*, 281.

⁵⁵ Poole and Slawson, *Church and Slave*, 14-15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

frequent comment in correspondence between the Barrens Vincentians and their European superiors, and created discontent among the lay brothers, who “resented the implicit identification of their work with that of slaves and were increasingly reluctant to do certain types of labor.”⁵⁷

The transfer of seminary property from the bishop to the Vincentians in 1833 gave the Barrens superiors more latitude over slaveholding, and the ascendancy of John Timon to the Visitorship in 1835 led to the gradual decline of the practice. Timon was personally opposed to slavery and throughout his tenure worked to reduce the number of slaves and to reunite slave families, so that the seminary owned only two slaves on the eve of the Civil War.⁵⁸

Poole and Slawson discuss the numbers, lifestyle, religious practices, and problems among the slaves of the Barrens from 1820 to 1860. Their analysis confirms that the “peculiar institution” was embedded in the early history of the community, and touched on several of the issues considered in this article, taxing the leadership of the Barrens, shaping its identity, necessitating flexibility and accommodation, reflecting its Americanization, and posing persistent problems.

Economic necessity also influenced the decision to open a lay college at the Barrens. The college was founded in 1822, and empowered by the state of Missouri to grant degrees in 1831 (making it the oldest institution of higher learning west of the Mississippi River). Like seminaries, early American Catholic colleges developed in an undifferentiated fashion and were not the independent, autonomous schools of today. Indeed, Catholic colleges were tied closely to seminaries up to the mid-nineteenth century. According to Gleason, “college and seminary developed hand in hand, and with the strongest kind of encouragement from the bishops. The college half of the arrangement was vital, not only because it funneled clerical prospects into the seminary but also because it brought in funds to support the seminarians.... But the benefits did not flow in one direction only; the college-seminary relationship was a symbiotic affair.”⁵⁹ Seminaries provided teachers for the colleges; colleges provided funds for the seminaries. Throughout its existence (1822-1866), the Barrens college retained its “homogeneous” character and close identification with the seminary and other works at the Barrens.

Of course, the development of the Barrens was driven by more than economic necessity. The very real spiritual needs of the Barrens settlement occasioned the establishment of parochial institutions on their grounds. In Europe, the Vincentians considered their primary works to be the conduct of

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 179-182.

⁵⁹ Gleason, “From an Indefinite Homogeneity,” 58.

parish missions, clerical retreats, seminary education, and foreign missions — with a lesser priority on the administration of parishes. However, the 1815 contract with Bishop Dubourg acknowledged that “the urgent wants of those souls who have been so long destitute of spiritual assistance will require much zeal on the part of the missionaries, who will go here and there to assist and instruct them.”⁶⁰

By the terms of the contract, the Vincentians reserved the right to accept or reject parishes as a community, and any parochial obligations accepted were to be administered according to the will and direction of the Vincentian superior (not the bishop). This demand occasioned disagreement between the American Vincentians and the local ordinary in the first decades of the American mission. However, practically speaking, the Vincentians recognized the need for the care of souls very early on their arrival in Missouri, and the Vincentian superior was also vicar-general of the diocese with responsibilities for the broader spiritual health of the region.

Of course, the Catholics from the Barrens settlement who offered land and labor to Bishop Dubourg for the new Louisiana seminary were motivated primarily by the desire for resident clergy in their community. For over a decade before the arrival of the Vincentians, the settlers had lobbied Church authorities for a resident priest in place of the occasional missionaries who visited them from Bardstown, Ste. Genevieve, or St. Louis.⁶¹

Construction of a Barrens church was begun even before the arrival of the Vincentians, and after 1819 the superiors of the Vincentian mission served as *de facto* pastors of St. Mary’s Parish, with assistance from the other seminary priests and students. From 1819 to 1848, Fathers Rosati, Tornatore, and Timon in turn supervised the American Vincentian mission, administered the seminary and college, and pastored the growing parish community at the Barrens.⁶² The original log church was expanded in 1819 and 1825 before a new stone edifice, modeled on the church at Monte Citorio, was begun in 1827 and completed, amidst much pomp and splendor, in October 1837.⁶³ By

⁶⁰ Rybolt, ed., *American Vincentians*, 452.

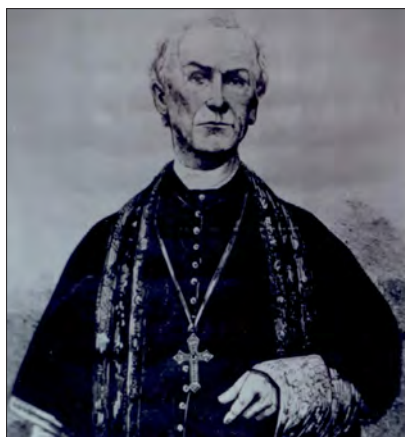
⁶¹ See, for example, “Diary of the Reverend Father Marie Joseph Dunand,” trans. Ella M.E. Flick, *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society* 27:1 (March 1916), 46. Dunand was a Trappist who visited the Barrens from his base in Florissant and convinced the settlers to lobby Dubourg for the seminary.

⁶² De Andreis estimated a Catholic population at the Barrens of 80 families in 1818; a report in the *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* estimated a total Catholic population of 3,000 in 1837; and, extrapolating from official Census numbers, a figure of 2,500 Barrens parishioners by 1840 seems appropriate. Rybolt, ed., *Frontier Missionary*, 179; *Annales* (1838), 92; and “Perry County Population Figures 1830-1990,” *Perry County Heritage Journal* 12:2 (1994), 76.

⁶³ For more detail on the early history of the parish, see John J. Bagen, C.M., *St. Mary’s of the Barrens Parish: The Early Days* (Perryville, MO: Association of the Miraculous Medal, St. Mary’s Seminary, 1987), copy in DRMA.

that time, the Barrens complex included a free school for the male children of Barrens settlers (supported by subscription and occasional donations to the seminary), a girls' school under the leadership of the Sisters of Loretto (1823), and a new cemetery (1836). The once struggling settlement bereft of clerical services had become a true Catholic center by 1840.

The pastoral needs of the territory outside the vicinity of the Barrens also commanded the attention of the Vincentians. From the time that De Andreis assumed temporary control of the old parish at Ste. Genevieve in 1817, Vincentian missionaries spread throughout the area seeking pockets of Catholic settlement. In 1824, Rosati commissioned Fathers Jean-Marie Odin and John Timon to begin mission trips south of the Barrens, recognizing "that a great many families dispersed throughout the vast and extensive portions of this Diocese especially committed to our care have been these many years destitute of every kind of spiritual assistance for want of clergymen, we have thought it our duty to afford them that spiritual comfort which is now in our power."⁶⁴ As a result, the Barrens became the virtual nerve center of missionary efforts in southern Missouri, Illinois, Arkansas, and as far as Texas over the next quarter century.



John Timon, C.M. (1797-1867). Portrait.

Images collected by the Vincentian Studies Institute

The growth of the Barrens under John Timon in the late 1830's brought requests from American bishops for the Vincentians to staff and direct new apostolates far removed from the Barrens motherhouse. American bishops approached the Vincentians with offers to establish new

⁶⁴ "Testimonial Given to Rev. J.M. Odin, C.M.," 8 September 1824, Rosati Letters, DRMA.

seminaries or assume control of existing institutions. Over a ten year period beginning in 1838, Timon accepted Vincentian responsibility for seminaries in Plattenville (Louisiana), Rose Hill (New York), Philadelphia, Bardstown (Kentucky), and Cincinnati while refusing offers for Nashville, Pittsburgh, Vincennes (Indiana), Emmitsburg (Maryland), Charlottetown (Canada), and Richmond. "The bishops of this country," Timon wrote his superiors at the time, "as if by a preconcerted move, are offering us their seminaries."⁶⁵ For a brief time, the Barrens became the cradle of American seminaries, although the experience proved relatively short-lived as conflicts with bishops over control and money, the hostility of the diocesan clergy, and the lack of qualified personnel to fill these numerous posts led the Vincentians to withdraw from most of these commitments.⁶⁶

By mid-century, the Barrens had also become something of a greenhouse for the cultivation of American Catholic bishops. The erection of new dioceses to administer the growing numbers of Catholics in the country created a demand for educated leaders, and prominent among the candidates for the new bishoprics were Vincentians from the Barrens, beginning with the appointments of Rosati to St. Louis in 1827, and Leo De Neckere to New Orleans in 1829. By the 1840's, Vincentian authorities were engaged in a constant struggle to keep their best American members from being co-opted into the episcopacy, even threatening at times to withdraw all their members from the United States if American bishops did not cease to promote Vincentian candidates for open bishoprics. While a number of nominations were averted in the early 1840's, over the next twenty-five years a number of Barrens priests were successfully appointed to American bishoprics: Timon himself to Buffalo in 1847; Jean-Marie Odin to Galveston in 1847; Thaddeus Amat to Monterey, California, in 1853; John Lynch to Toronto in 1859; Michael Domenech to Pittsburgh in 1860; and Stephen Vincent Ryan to Buffalo in 1868.

Begun as a seminary to train priests for Dubourg's underserved diocese, the Barrens became, in turn, a shadow chancery for the diocese of upper Louisiana and St. Louis, motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission (and provincial headquarters after the elevation of the American mission to the status of an independent province in 1835), lay college, parish and elementary school, mission center, taproot for new seminaries and bishoprics, and economic/cultural center for the Barrens settlement. The assumption of the diocesan vicariate by the Barrens superiors, beginning with De Andreis, complicated the development of the seminary, which grew

⁶⁵ Stafford Poole, C.M., "A Brave New World," *Vincentian Heritage* 14:1 (1993), 144-145.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

necessarily to meet its own needs for economic self-sufficiency as well as the needs of the local community, the diocese, and the broader American Catholic Church. Philip Gleason describes this as the “foothold function” of early American Catholic colleges, which became the “initial base[s]” for the development of the broader Catholic community and virtual “all-purpose center[s] of Catholic life.”⁶⁷

Flexibility

The willingness of the Vincentians to accept (and even direct) the shifting identities of their motherhouse during its early years was reflected in the often flexible policies adopted at the Barrens. Even before their arrival in Missouri, Bishop Flaget advised the Barrens missionaries “not to attack certain customs of the country, which were not wrong in themselves, nor opposed to the gospel or the laws of the Church, but merely different from the customs of Europe. A certain amount of toleration is laudable and if it had always been observed by other missionaries, many scandals would have been prevented.”⁶⁸ De Andreis took this counsel to heart, and, as mentioned, determined to base his decisions as superior on the premise that “the Congregation is for the Church, and not the Church for the Congregation.”⁶⁹

Physical conditions at the Barrens necessitated a high degree of practicality and compromise. The earliest band of missionaries determined to maintain a regular schedule of instruction and spiritual formation as circumstances allowed, even during their travels from Europe to Missouri. But the Barrens offered few amenities, and the group was forced to improvise as best as possible. In lieu of a completed seminary building, the original band was housed in temporary quarters at the home of the widowed Mrs. Sarah Hayden. With Rosati as rector, the small group quickly altered the borrowed home “so as to suit as much as possible the ordinary exercises of a seminary,” including the transformation of a part of the front porch into a chapel “enclosed with a partition made of interwoven tree branches in the form of a basket, which was coated with well kneaded earth mixed with straw.... [and] hung with white bed sheets.”⁷⁰ When the Hayden home eventually proved inconvenient given its distance from the site of the old log church and seminary construction site, the community transferred to some nearby log cabins. John Timon described these “small log houses,” including

⁶⁷ Gleason, “From an Indefinite Homogeneity,” 61-62.

⁶⁸ Rosati, *Life of De Andreis*, 138-139.

⁶⁹ De Andreis to Carlo Domenico Sicardi, C.M., Rome, 24 February 1818, in Rybolt, ed., *Frontier Missionary*, 192.

⁷⁰ Rosati, “Recollections,” 4:2, 113.

one designated as the *University*, wherein the “northeast corner was the theology department for study and lecture, the northwest corner was for philosophy and general literature, the southeast was the tailor’s shop, the southwest was the shoemaker’s department.”⁷¹

Meanwhile, clerics, students and local volunteers alike worked to build a more permanent and impressive multi-story frame house for the community. Rosati described the various activities of the seminary band, “cutting, sawing and transporting the supplies they needed.... rolling, piling up and burning the tree trunks when they were clearing the fields.... [bringing] stone for the construction of the house and church.... [making] roofing shingles and... in a word, doing every kind of work when their help was asked.”⁷² In such an environment, new arrivals that possessed practical skills — like the indefatigable and versatile Brother Martin Blanka, the stonemason Brother Angelo Oliva, and the physician-priest Francis Cellini, C.M. — were especially prized.

Even as the Barrens stabilized physically, economic and cultural circumstances continued to demand practical accommodation. Among the most distinctive accommodations made by early American Catholic institutions, as analyzed by Gleason, was their “mixed” composition. For colleges and seminaries, that meant mixing not only lay and clerical students but Catholics and Protestants and various age levels in a manner foreign to European experience.⁷³

European Vincentian leaders were already suspicious about the mingling of diocesan and Vincentian seminarians at the Barrens, and the establishment of a lay college in 1822 did little to allay those concerns. The college accepted its first four local students that same year, who shared the recently completed “University” building that housed clerics and seminarians. As the original building was enlarged, collegians were “immediately and completely separated from the clerics and at length that part of the establishment took on the form of a regular college,” with its own rules and regulations.⁷⁴ From this humble beginning, the lay college grew impressively, counting 130 students in 1830 and, even after the defections during the Tornatore years and the confusion surrounding the 1835 decree of suppression, 100 students in 1837.⁷⁵ Students came from the surrounding

⁷¹ Timon, “Barrens Memoir,” 53.

⁷² Joseph Rosati, C.M., “Recollections of the Establishment of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States, Part 6,” *Vincentian Heritage* 5:2 (1984), 109.

⁷³ Gleason, “From an Indefinite Homogeneity,” 57-60.

⁷⁴ Rosati, “Recollections,” 5:1, 105.

⁷⁵ Rybolt, ed., *American Vincentians*, 292; *Annales* (1838), 93.

area and from points south and east, with a significant contingent from Louisiana drawn to the Catholic college upriver.

Rosati defended the founding of the lay college in his later recollections of the Barrens, explaining that “although the principal object of the establishment was the ecclesiastical education of students destined for the sanctuary, still they were obliged to accept other boys for whom there was no other means of education.”⁷⁶ He cited the lack of adequate religious and practical instruction available to secular students in the area, and the “shock” of Protestants who complained that the Barrens evidently sought “no involvement with the public good.” He portrayed the college as a moral imperative and instrument of service and evangelization, “a means of doing good and saving souls” consistent with the spirit of Vincent de Paul. Only after these arguments did Rosati cite the financial benefits of the college, “without which they [the seminarians] could not have been either accepted or supported,” and the role of the college in providing prospective recruits for the seminary.⁷⁷

Practical accommodations were also made regarding the curriculum of the Barrens college and seminary. Like most American colleges at the time, the Barrens offered the equivalent of a combined high school prep and collegiate curriculum, including languages (Latin, Greek, English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish), mathematics, sciences (chemistry, astronomy, and geology), history, logic and philosophy, music and theology. While Tornatore opposed the teaching of worldly subjects like “music, drawing and gymnastic exercises,” Bishop Rosati and John Timon insisted on the propriety of these disciplines.⁷⁸

In his history of the early settlement of the Mississippi Valley, former Barrens collegian Firmin Rozier, scion of a distinguished Ste. Genevieve family and prominent local politician, noted the establishment of the Barrens college, which “acquired a great reputation in the West and was conducted by persons of intellect, virtue and learning, who afterwards acquired national reputations.”⁷⁹ However, William Clark Kennerly, nephew of General William Clark and a noted soldier and frontiersman in his own right, remembered less the academic reputation of the college during his student days than its relative tolerance: “The discipline was not very rigid; we were

⁷⁶ Rosati, “Recollections,” 5:1, 104.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷⁹ Firmin A. Rozier, *Rozier's History of the Early Settlement of the Mississippi Valley* (St. Louis, MO: G.A. Pierrot and Son, 1890), 126. Available at: www.archive.org/stream/roziershistoryof00roziola/roziershistoryof00roziola_djvu.text (accessed 6 June 2012).

allowed to smoke at any and all times, and the smoke from the black cigars which we bought outside the grounds was often so thick that one could hardly see across the room"; and the kindness of the Vincentians (whom he misidentified as Jesuits!), "It was little of books that we learned here from the good Jesuits but much of nature and kindly companionship combined with a certain manliness which was to stand us in good stead when battling with the rough frontier life of afterdays."⁸⁰ The practical aspects of Vincentian education, adapted to the American frontier, in this instance won out over a concern for rigor and uniformity.

At the Barrens seminary, students undertook a traditional curriculum of philosophical and theological studies, together with the "study of geography, history, mathematics" and a special emphasis on the Latin, Greek, French, and English languages. According to Rosati, "It was not enough to have the rules of these languages learned in class, but they were also required to practice them during their daily recreations. The rule required that English be spoken at recreation one week, French another, and finally during the third week Latin."⁸¹ Rosati was also known for his enthusiasm for Catholic ritual and music, and "ceremonies and chant... were not looked on as trifles or matters of indifference" at the Barrens.⁸²



Portrait of Joseph Rosati, C.M. (1789-1843).
Collegio Leoniano, Rome, Italy.
Images collected by the Vincentian Studies Institute

⁸⁰ Rybolt, ed., *American Vincentians*, 293.

⁸¹ Rosati, "Recollections," 5:2, 110-111.

⁸² *Ibid.*

Vincentian seminaries in Europe were noted for their emphasis on uniformity and rigorous discipline. However, according to Stafford Poole, the Congregation's seminaries were less intellectual and academic, and noted more for their pastoral orientation, in line with Vincent's emphasis on practical education suited to the needs of the time and the apostolate.⁸³ The commitment to the study of languages and liturgical rites at the Barrens reflects this tendency toward the practical and pastoral. Perhaps one reason why so many American bishops appealed to the Vincentians to operate their diocesan seminaries was this particular combination of rigor and practicality, which better suited the needs of the pioneer American Church.

The unique situation of the Barrens, and the American Vincentian mission in general, and efforts to adapt historic norms to American circumstances, were reflected in Timon's regulations to govern the newly erected American province after 1835. Inspired by his own experience of want in the early years at the Barrens, Timon initiated a number of innovations, including slightly later rising times at Vincentian houses, more days off for the faculty (including an official holiday to observe the Fourth of July), and a refreshing concern for the personal health of priests and their charges (evidenced by the demand for more careful preparation of "fresh and nutritious" food).⁸⁴

Perhaps nothing speaks more clearly to the boundless and homogenous nature of early American Catholic institutions like St. Mary's of the Barrens than this practical willingness to adapt policies and decisions to the specific environment and needs of the apostolate. Even Rosati and Timon, however, were careful to note that regularity was maintained in the face of challenging circumstances. "It should be observed here," Rosati later wrote in his memoirs of the early years at the Barrens, "that in spite of the difficulties of a rather rough beginning, the discomfort of an uncomfortable and cooped up dwelling, the multiplicity of occupations, the distraction of the works of the house and the countryside, the commotion made by the workers, the care of a parish that was growing daily, all the exercises of the Community, the novitiate and the seminary were always followed in their turn by everyone and presided over by the Superior in person."⁸⁵ Timon noted the same of his own tenure at the Barrens, "When he [Timon] assumed the government, and for some years before, there had been no repetition on Sundays [Repetition of Prayer, a Vincentian tradition of sharing the insights of personal prayer with

⁸³ Stafford Poole, C.M., *History of the Congregation of the Mission, 1625-1843* (Vincentian Fathers and Brothers, St. Mary's Seminary, 1973), 96.

⁸⁴ Rybolt, ed., *American Vincentians*, 43.

⁸⁵ Rosati, "Recollections," 5:2, 108.

confreres in community], no office of the little hours of the day, no lecture for brothers on Sundays and holidays, no humiliation [confession of faults], no asking to be warned in chapter, no missions, no cases of consciences [case studies in moral theology]. All this, whilst he was superior at the Barrens, was changed.”⁸⁶ Even as they adapted to the circumstances of the Barrens through flexible and practical accommodations, the leaders of the Barrens recognized the norms which shaped them as Vincentians.

Americanization

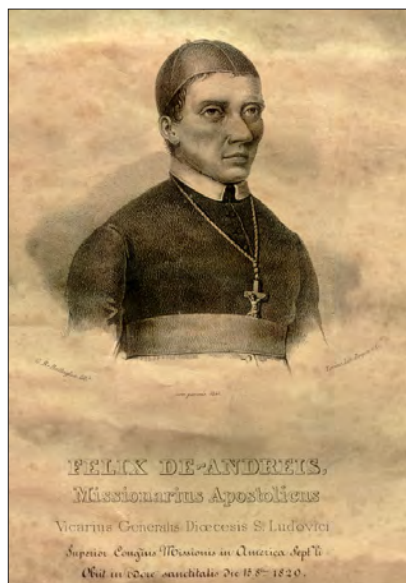
By the middle of the nineteenth century, as the number of Catholic immigrants to the U.S. grew, critics like the New England Catholic convert Orestes Brownson were calling for a more thorough-going assimilation of Catholic institutions into American culture.⁸⁷ Gleason cites the campaign for Americanization waged by *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, and especially a series of articles pertaining to American Catholic seminaries, as characteristic of the mid-century era of “consolidation” and its critique of existing Catholic culture.⁸⁸ In those articles, liberal American Catholic clergymen like William I. Barry and Jeremiah W. Cummings advocated for specific reforms in seminary education, including the abandonment of the old “mixed” college-seminaries, the establishment of “minor” (i.e. college prep or high school) seminaries to increase American vocations, and the “the importance of developing a national clergy — a body of Catholic clergymen whose American birth and education would constitute the ideal preparation for pastoral service to an American flock.”⁸⁹ For Gleason, this reform campaign, highlighting the issue of Americanization as a prominent element in the historical development of Catholic institutions, represents a shift from the era of boundlessness to one of stabilization and consolidation. The degree to which institutions like the Barrens were (or were becoming) “American,” therefore, becomes a crucial issue in the analysis of early American Catholicism.

⁸⁶ Timon, “Barrens Memoir,” 105.

⁸⁷ See Patrick W. Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane*, Library of Religious Biography (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004); John T. McGreevey, *Catholics and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003); and Gleason, “Boundlessness, Consolidation and Discontinuity,” 588-592.

⁸⁸ Gleason, *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 590. Cummings argued that “...it requires a great effort and unusual grace on the part of an American to feel at home with a clergyman different from himself not only in religion but in his feelings, interests, manners and even in his speech.” Jeremiah W. Cummings, “Vocations to the Priesthood,” *Brownson's Quarterly Review* 17 (October 1860), 503-04.



The earliest engraving of Felix De Andreis, C.M.
Images collected by the Vincentian Studies Institute

The earliest missionaries at the Barrens expressed a broad curiosity, and confusion, about their new American homeland. De Andreis was amazed by the climate and culture he encountered in the New World. His letters describe a magnificent and often bewildering land of immense space, teeming wildlife (including such exotic specimens as rattlesnakes and ticks), extremes of climate and weather, expensive essentials, indifferent Protestant cultures, and treacherous travel.⁹⁰ Others, especially among later groups of recruits to the Barrens, struggled to learn the intricacies of the English language and American manners. The resulting tensions provoked sporadic outbreaks of Protestant bigotry, flamed by cultural as well as theological differences.

The problem was reflected most keenly in the attitudes of the brothers attached to the Barrens, who otherwise proved indispensable for their efforts in building the Barrens and securing the economic foundations of the house. The work of the brothers brought them into close contact with the local Barrens population (and, hence, the temper of the secular culture of the day). A group of brothers believed that the Barrens community should have left Missouri for lower Louisiana in 1825, when Dubourg proposed a new and apparently richer locale for the seminary. Under Timon's leadership,

⁹⁰ Rybolt, ed., *Frontier Missionary*.

they continued to complain about the extremes of climate, the infertility of the soil, and their poor living conditions.⁹¹ The discontent of the brothers was undoubtedly stirred by the democratic climate of the New World. Some among them resented the dominance of their ordained confreres. Some felt that their work was underappreciated and their input into community affairs and decisions was slighted. Democratic leveling proved a two-edged sword, however. The same American spirit that inspired egalitarian ambitions led the brothers to resentment over “the implicit identification of their work with that of slaves and... [to increasing reluctance] to do certain types of labor, perhaps under the influence of American attitudes.”⁹²

But these cultural tensions were tempered by three important factors in the history of the Barrens: the prudence inherent in Vincentian spirituality, the history and influence of the Barrens settlement itself, and the leadership of American-born John Timon. Vincentian spirituality emphasized humility and deference, qualities — alongside willingness to sacrifice for the advancement of the apostolate — that inspired an acceptance of the prevailing environment and cultural accommodation. “Vincentian formation once put a high value on the virtue of prudence,” in the words of the editors of *The American Vincentians*, “defined not in its classic scholastic sense of choosing appropriate means to a specified end but with a strong connotation of caution bordering on timidity.”⁹³ Such values would not have inspired active resistance to American norms and cultures, despite personal confusion and bewilderment.

The culture of the surrounding community also contributed to the assimilation of the seminary. The Barrens Settlement was a relatively young outpost when the Vincentians arrived in 1818. Founded in the late eighteenth century by English migrants from Maryland via Kentucky, the earliest settlers of the Barrens secured Spanish land grants in what both Spain and (after 1803) the United States administered as the southern region of the old district of Ste. Genevieve. The inhabitants were first and foremost farmers, generally disinterested in the lead mining activities to their north. “Apparently,” as Walter Schroeder observes, “not a single Barrens resident moved to the mining communities.... Neither did these agriculturists get involved in fur or river trade or in salt making. Their commitment to agriculture with slaves was near total.”⁹⁴ The other distinguishing characteristic of the early Barrens settlers was their Catholicism. For these Catholic farmers, “the seminary and lay college were not just educational institutions, but also, in the dearth

⁹¹ Rybolt, ed., *American Vincentians*, 34.

⁹² Poole and Slawson, *Church and Slave*, 156.

⁹³ Rybolt, ed., *American Vincentians*, 436.

⁹⁴ Schroeder, *Opening the Ozarks*, 392.

of merchants and other stores between Ste. Genevieve and Jackson... a commercial center and the true central place of the Barrens, before the county seat of Perryville functioned as one [c. 1826]."⁹⁵ Later German immigrants (Catholic and Lutheran) to the area accentuated the conservative tendencies of the farming community, and the county became what Timothy O'Rourke called "a religious haven in the trans-Mississippi west."⁹⁶

Of course, the location and historical development of the Barrens seminary also influenced its adaptation to American culture and mores. Established by Italian and French clerics on the edge of an old French district organized under Spanish land laws, populated by predominantly Anglo-American Catholics and later German immigrants, the Barrens grew into a distinctly American settlement by the middle of the nineteenth century. Contact with overwhelmingly American settlements like Cape Girardeau to the south, and the predominance of small farms, contributed to the economic development of what became Perry County. The priests and brothers of the Barrens adapted, by necessity, to these social and economic circumstances, operating a lay school and farm, purchasing (and accepting gifts of) additional properties, expanding facilities, buying and employing slaves, and securing loans in a manner often bewildering to their European confreres.

Finally, the powerful influence of John Timon directed the process of Americanization at the Barrens. Timon's story is in many ways a very American tale. As superior of the Barrens, Timon focused on adapting "European Vincentian ways to the American scene."⁹⁷ Timon's own account of his leadership accentuates the drama of his missionary trips through rural mid-America, and his efforts to capitalize on the American economic boom to improve the finances of his community. He also proved willing to accept new apostolates far removed from the Barrens, so that the Vincentians became a truly American-wide religious congregation. John Rybolt's assessment of Timon speaks to his Americanizing propensities: "It is clear to me that Timon's great contribution to the growth of the Vincentian community was that he was American born, and that consequently his decisions arose from an American mindset. Although familiar with European models and with the spiritual tradition mediated through De Andreis and Rosati, Timon, even more than Rosati, acknowledged the need to adapt to American life. The province became American, and gradually grew in numbers of other American-born members."⁹⁸

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 393.

⁹⁶ Timothy O'Rourke, *Perry County, Missouri: Religious Haven in the Trans-Mississippi West* (Parsons, KS: Brefney Press, 1979).

⁹⁷ Rybolt, "Three Pioneer Vincentians," 163.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

The combination of traditional Vincentian spirituality, close contact with the distinctly American Catholic population of the Barrens Settlement, and the influence of John Timon, facilitated the process of cultural assimilation at the Barrens. Of course, tensions and inconsistencies persisted as American Vincentians sometimes struggled to accommodate American habits in areas like the maintenance of community life, daily schedule, travel, dress, use of tobacco and alcohol, finances, and personal values.⁹⁹ Those accommodations and accompanying tensions played out over the broader course of American Vincentian history and “would not be totally exorcised until after Vatican II.”¹⁰⁰ However, during the early history of the Barrens the spirit of the Congregation neatly coincided with the essential conservatism of rural southeastern Missouri to create an institution that avoided extremes and contented itself with “silent service... [and] a low profile in the American Church.”¹⁰¹

Persistent Problems

Dynamic leadership, shifting identities, flexible policies, and a propensity toward Americanization did not, of course, preclude the persistence of often daunting challenges and problems at the early Barrens. While some of these problems were systemic, owing to the chronically desperate early circumstances of the institution, others were more particular, reflecting the eccentricities of time and place. Most, however, could generally be subsumed under three categories: finances, personnel, and authority. The early Barrens was plagued by a chronic lack of funds, a shortage of well-trained and adaptable priests and brothers, and tensions over the exercise of jurisdictional authority and external demands. As Gleason observes of other early American Catholic institutions, these problems often spawned additional concerns as leaders responded to pressing needs with a “ragged informality” that exacerbated internal and external pressures for conformity or additional compromise.¹⁰²

The early American Vincentian mission was begun on “a hope and a prayer” as Dubourg scoured Europe for missionaries and resources.¹⁰³ The initial contributions of the Italian Vincentians and the Society for the

⁹⁹ Rybolt, ed., *American Vincentians*, 446.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 448.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 436.

¹⁰² Gleason, “Boundlessness, Consolidation and Discontinuity,” 600.

¹⁰³ All early American Catholic seminaries faced severe financial problems, leading one historian of the movement to characterize their history as “a story of constant struggle against poverty.” Lloyd Paul McDonald, *The Seminary Movement in the United States: Projects, Foundations and Early Development, 1784-1833* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1927), 56.

Propagation of the Faith sustained the initial band of missionaries for a time, but the mounting expenses of establishing a Catholic foothold in largely non-Catholic frontier territory proved daunting. The original patrimony provided by the Barrens settlers, including the 640 acre land grant and promise of labor, was complicated by contractual and circumstantial factors, as well as the reality of the lack of capital in their community.¹⁰⁴ Dubourg and Rosati were unable to help substantially, and further complicated matters by their inability to compensate the Vincentians for the maintenance of diocesan seminarians.¹⁰⁵

Given the conditions, the early seminary struggled to sustain itself economically through agricultural activities and commercial relations with the surrounding community. As a result, the Barrens community depended on fund-raising efforts, often undertaken by the missionaries on return trips to Europe. Vincentian superiors in Italy proved helpful, as did grants from the Society for the Propagation of the Faith (established in Lyons in 1822), the Austrian Leopoldine Society (established in 1829), and the Bavarian Ludwig *Missionsverein* (established in 1838).¹⁰⁶ Yet even these efforts, and the steady growth of the Barrens under Timon's leadership, proved insufficient, and the subsequent recourse to borrowing money spurred concerns both within the Barrens and among European Vincentian superiors. The relative impoverishment of the community incited recurrent complaints about the inhospitable nature of the area and the need to relocate elsewhere.¹⁰⁷

A chronic lack of funds to support the Barrens was accompanied by a similar dearth of personnel to maintain the many on-going works of the seminary-college-parish-mission center. In his memoirs, Rosati recalled the early days at the Barrens: "The country was new. The diocese, even newer than the country, had just been born. Everything was still to be created, everything had to be organized. There was a certain number of parishes to provide for, others to be established, and missionaries to be sent to visit the Catholics scattered over those vast regions. There was, then, a great need for workers and it was impossible to bring together all the priests of the Congregation in

¹⁰⁴ Rybolt, ed., *American Vincentians*, 35-36.

¹⁰⁵ Timon, "Barrens Memoir," 51.

¹⁰⁶ John E. Rybolt, C.M., "Seminary Education in the Louisiana Territory: The Vincentian Contribution," at: http://works.bepress.com/john_rybolt/34 (accessed 6 June 2012).

¹⁰⁷ As early as 1814, the American writer/politician Henry Brackenridge described the area of the Barrens as "scarcely fit for tillage, badly watered, with woods of a poor and straggling growth." Henry Marie Brackenridge, *Views of Louisiana; Containing Geographical, Statistical and Historical Notices of that Vast and Important Portion of America* (Baltimore, MD: Schaeffer and Maund, 1823), 202. Over the next 200 years, Brackenridge's views were echoed in one form or another by various Vincentians.

the same place. Mr. Rosati was all alone at the seminary...."¹⁰⁸ New members from Europe occasionally augmented the ranks of the motherhouse, with a contingent including the invaluable Father Francis Cellini arriving as early as January 1819. By 1828 the Barrens community, according to Rosati, numbered four priests, eight brothers, sixteen seminarians, and thirty college students. But, before his departure in 1826, Dubourg continued to press for missionaries away from the Barrens (especially in lower Louisiana), as did Rosati himself on becoming bishop in 1827. Rosati acknowledged that the comings and goings of Vincentians (including himself) from the Barrens "always caused a kind of disorder in the community and some distressing changes."¹⁰⁹

Growing numbers of European clergymen sometimes presented different challenges. Early American bishops recognized the problems caused by "missionary adventurers" and "floaters" that moved, like clerical mercenaries, from one institution or diocese to another; or, even worse, problems caused by immoral priests who created scandals in the nineteenth century Church.¹¹⁰ The Barrens was indirectly touched by one such scandalous figure. Angelo Inglesi was ordained by Dubourg in 1820 and was rapidly promoted in the Louisiana diocese. By 1823, it was discovered that Inglesi was an impostor with no verifiable clerical education who had married in Quebec and was often seen at social functions, even after ordination, in lay garb behaving inappropriately. Dubourg was devastated by these revelations, which were uncovered by Bertrand Martial, one of Dubourg's harshest critics in the New Orleans Church.¹¹¹

More commonly than scandal, some Barrens clerics proved a poor fit for their positions. Angelo Boccardo was sent to America to relieve Rosati of his burden as superior of the Barrens in 1827, but, on disembarking at the port of New Orleans with \$2,000 in contributions for the seminary, dropped his luggage in the Mississippi River and returned to Europe in distress, despite Rosati's belated pleas to remain.¹¹² As mentioned, when a permanent replacement for Rosati did arrive in the person of John Tornatore in 1831, his scrupulous adherence to the letter of the law caused disruption in the house and fanned discontent among some Barrens residents. Other new arrivals simply proved eccentric or naïve to the conditions of the New World. The Milanese priest John Rosetti arrived at the Barrens in 1820 with a small

¹⁰⁸ Rosati, "Recollections," 4:2, 118.

¹⁰⁹ Rosati, "Recollections," 5:2, 119.

¹¹⁰ Gleason, "Boundlessness, Consolidation and Discontinuity," 593, 603.

¹¹¹ Melville, *Dubourg*, 2:585-92, 745.

¹¹² Easterly, *First Bishop*, 97.

group of protégés intent on establishing their own missionary order, only to abandon their plan within a short time.¹¹³ Finally, in a near-comic interlude, one young “subdeacon, very pious but also very attached to his own opinion, believed that he had for a long time been favored with supernatural lights” and “raised up by God to go convert the Jews in Asia,” only to be disabused of his notions by the more practical perspectives of Dubourg, De Andreis, and Rosati.¹¹⁴

Authority issues also complicated business at the Barrens. Clashes with the bishop over the assignment of Barrens priests to missions and parishes were common, as were attempts to move the diocesan seminary away. A major disagreement occurred in 1825, when Dubourg proposed the establishment of a new seminary in lower Louisiana. The idea of a seminary for the southern part of the territory was not new, but the struggles of the Barrens complicated the opening of a new institution which might draw scarce resources from the Missouri seminary. Rosati was surprised when Bishop Dubourg “proposed to his coadjutor that he [Rosati] go there himself with the entire Community and leave one priest with some young cleric at the Barrens.” Dubourg argued that lower Louisiana represented “a very much more important” part of the diocese than Missouri, and could support a seminary and the Vincentian mission with greater ease.¹¹⁵ Rosati answered that abandoning the Barrens after its early struggles to establish itself would devastate the Church in upper Louisiana. Vincentian authorities successfully opposed the move, citing the danger of running up additional debt to establish a new seminary, the small number of priests that made it impossible to maintain two houses, and the injustice of abandoning upper Louisiana, “a country where there is such immense fruit to harvest.”¹¹⁶

The impulsive Dubourg was disappointed by the Vincentians refusal to leave the Barrens for the richer territory of Louisiana. “I have said Fiat to the deliberation of your Council. Having few years to live I will probably not see the extinction of the Diocese. And if I see it, I will have nothing for which to reproach myself.”¹¹⁷ The bishop’s efforts to bolster lower Louisiana, given the agreement a year earlier to divide the diocese into two (New Orleans and St. Louis) by 1827, fueled suspicions that he was systematically sabotaging prospects for the church in upper Louisiana in favor of the lower portion of his vast diocese, which he coveted for himself. While Dubourg

¹¹³ Rosati, “Recollections,” 4:2, 128. Five members of the band eventually joined the Vincentian community, including three ordained priests and two brothers.

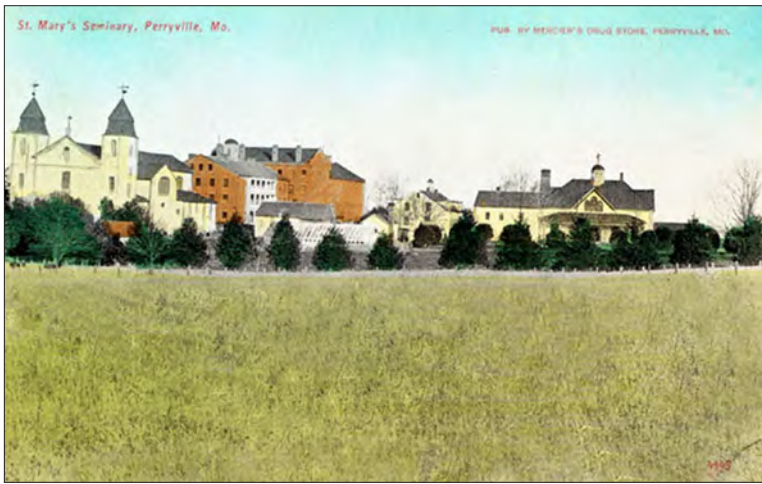
¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 126-128. The young man “left the diocese at the beginning of the year 1820.”

¹¹⁵ Rosati, “Recollections,” 5:2, 115-16.

¹¹⁶ Melville, *Dubourg*, 1:87.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:744.

eventually relented and recognized the folly of endangering an already established seminary to enhance the prospects of an as yet unestablished one, the disagreement spilled over into larger debates about the wisdom and timing of the division of the Louisiana territory into two dioceses. Rosati hoped the creation of a separate St. Louis diocese would aid efforts to keep Vincentians in central houses close to the Barrens. Dubourg argued that the timing was inopportune given the lack of priests and that the division must be postponed.¹¹⁸



Turn-of-the-twentieth-century postcard of St. Mary's Seminary.
 Courtesy of Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL

As early as 1838, Bishop Rosati proposed to move the diocesan seminarians to a location in St. Louis, while keeping students studying for the Vincentian community at the Barrens. Rosati believed that the establishment of a St. Louis seminary would address several problems, including the lack of finances, the “mixing” of diocesan and Vincentian seminarians, and the lack of priests in St. Louis itself.¹¹⁹ The move also reflected a sentiment, privately repeated by Rosati’s coadjutor bishop Francis P. Kenrick, that, “As an Ecclesiastical Seminary it [the Barrens] has proven an entire failure, and this is felt by none more sensibly than by the Superiors themselves.”¹²⁰ Rosati extolled the virtues of his seminary plan in a pastoral letter in April

¹¹⁸ Easterly, *First Bishop*, 89.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹²⁰ John E. Rybolt, C.M., “Kenrick’s First Seminary,” *Missouri Historical Review* 71:2 (January 1977), 141.

1839, but financial considerations and the bishop's departure for Baltimore and Europe, leaving behind mounting debts and the ruins of construction for the new establishment, doomed Rosati's dream. Kenrick took up the challenge, however, and by October 1842 transferred diocesan seminarians and some Vincentian clerics from the Barrens to the Soulard Addition in southern St. Louis.¹²¹

Deliberations over the fortunes of the Barrens and the relocation of seminarians and/or lay collegians elsewhere were calculated partly to allay the continual fears of European Vincentian superiors, who opposed the "mixed state" of the Barrens. In 1835, the General Assembly of the Congregation issued a number of decrees pertaining to the American mission: (1) the suppression of the lay college at the Barrens given its declining numbers and inherent problems of discipline and intermingling with seminarians; (2) the requirement that the St. Louis diocese pay fees for each diocesan seminarian at the Barrens; (3) the construction of a separate building for the Vincentian community to minimize the "mixing" of candidates for diocesan and Vincentian orders; (4) limits to the number and locale of missionary priests sent from the Barrens and requirements that they adhere to Community rules as members of the sole Vincentian house in America; and (5) the replacement of Tornatore by Father John Timon, who would become superior of the Barrens and Visitor of the entire American Vincentian province.¹²²

The decrees of the General Assembly triggered a crisis both at the Barrens and in St. Louis, where Rosati objected strenuously to the financial impositions required for education of diocesan seminarians. Timon accepted the appointment as superior, but delayed the implementation of the other decrees, especially regarding the fate of the Barrens college. The newly elected Superior General of the Congregation, Jean-Baptiste Nozo, C.M., finally lifted the decree of suppression, relented on payment of diocesan fees for seminarians, and modified restrictions on the activities of college faculty-seminarians.

Finally, as we have seen, American Church leaders began what seemed an incessant campaign to draw Vincentians away from the Barrens to assume control of other diocesan seminaries, or to accept appointments as bishops of new dioceses. Rosati and Timon were hard pressed to respond to these requests and to balance the health of the Barrens against the broader

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, for details of the fortunes of the St. Louis diocesan seminary from 1842 to 1893, including relocations from the Barrens to the Soulard Addition (1842), Carondelet (1848), Cape Girardeau (1859), and back to St. Louis (1893).

¹²² Easterly, *First Bishop*, 141.

needs of the American Church. Despite its relative isolation and lack of resources, in its first decades the Barrens struggled to respond to the demands of its local bishop, European superiors, and American Church leaders.

Conclusion

The era of “indefinite homogeneity” at the Barrens ended by 1850. Timon’s elevation to the leadership of the new American province encouraged growth at the Barrens, but also led to the thinning out of Vincentian personnel as the order accepted new seminary apostolates throughout the United States. The transfer of diocesan seminarians to St. Louis in 1842, and of lay collegians to St. Vincent’s College in Cape Girardeau in 1843, signaled the end of an era. Timon’s own elevation to the bishopric of Buffalo in 1847 marked the definitive finale of the “era of boundlessness” at St. Mary’s of the Barrens, a period wherein the Vincentian community built a seminary, lay college, parish church, and local mission center in relative isolation and against tremendous odds.

As the early American republic grew and the Louisiana Territory was consolidated into numerous states, with waves of Old World immigrants provoking a corresponding nativism, as financial schemes were born and often died on the vine, and American culture began a fragmentation into sectional divides, St. Mary’s of the Barrens developed into a frontier Catholic center with various interconnected works in the spirit of American boundlessness. The first 30 years of the Barrens witnessed heroic efforts in the face of often overwhelming cultural, physical, and financial challenges. William Dubourg, Felix De Andreis, Joseph Rosati, and John Timon — recruiter, spiritual father, practical leader, and native son — established the Barrens as a haven of Catholic possibilities in the wilds of frontier Missouri. Perhaps their experience could prove useful in the twenty-first century, when dwindling personnel and resources once again present daunting challenges to the Congregation of the Mission and the Catholic Church.